

NEWS COLUMN

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Grazing Alfalfa in the Fall

What do you do with late fall alfalfa growth? This is a common question from producers this time of year. Alfalfa quality at this time of the year is very good; however, weather conditions are generally not the most ideal for drying the crop. Yields may not cover harvest cost if the crop is short. The use of grazing late fall alfalfa may be the least costly and most convenient harvest method available.

One main concern with grazing alfalfa anytime is the threat of bloat. There is research indicating bloat potential increases after frost. The risk of bloat with grazing can be minimized with proper management. Some considerations are:

- Fill cattle with dry hay or grass before turning on to the alfalfa.
- Turn cattle on alfalfa later in the day in order to avoid early morning frost and dew on the plants.
- Don't allow cattle to get empty before entering a new alfalfa stand.
- Observe cattle twice daily when they are grazing alfalfa.
- Feed cattle an anti-foaming agent two to five days before turning on alfalfa.
- Provide other filler forages such as dry hay or crop residues to cattle while they are grazing alfalfa.

It is crucial that alfalfa is not over-grazed. While stubble height is not a great concern during summer cuttings, it should be considered during late fall grazing. A minimum of six inches should be left to catch and hold snow during winter months. Snow cover helps prevent damage from winter kill factors including excessive temperature swings, ice layers and heaving. Although not a current consideration, keep cattle off wet alfalfa stands if conditions change. Let fields firm up adequately before grazing. Compaction and crown damage from soggy conditions can significantly reduce alfalfa stands.